THE PRINCESS ELOPES

By HAROLD MacGRATH

AUTHOR OF "THE MAN ON THE BOX," "HEARTS AND MASKS," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

It is rather difficult in these days for a man who takes such scant interest in foreign affairs—trust a whilom diplomat for that!—to follow the continual geographical disturbances of European surfaces. Thus, I can not distinctly recall the exact location of the Grand Duchy of Barscheit or of the neighboring principality of Doppelkinn. It meets my needs and purposes, however, to say that Berlin and Vienna were easily accessible, and that a three hours' journey would bring you under the shadow of the Carpathian range, where, in my diplomatic days, I used often to hunt the "bear that walks like a man."

Barscheit was known among her sister states as "the meddler," the "maker of trouble," and the duke as "Old Grumpy"—Brummbar. To use a familiar Yankee expression, Barscheit had a finger in every pie. Whenever there was a political broth making, whether in Italy, Germany or Austria, Barscelt would snatch up a ladle and start in. She took care of her own affairs so easily that she had plenty of time to concern herself with the affairs of her neighbors. This is not to advance the opinion that Barscheit was wholly modern; far from it. The fault of Barscheit may be traced back to a certain historical pillar of salt, easily recalled by all those who attended Sunday school. "Rubbering" is a vulgar phrase, and I disdain to use it.

When a woman looks around it is invariably a portent of trouble; the man forgets his important engagement, and runs amuck, knocking over people, principles and principalities. If Aspasia had not observed Pericles that memorable day; if there had not been an oblique slant to Calypso's eyes as Ulysses passed her way; if the eager Delilah had not offered favorable comment on Samson's ringlets; in fact, if all the women in history and romance had gone about their affairs as they should have done, what uninteresting reading history would be to-day!

Now this is a story of a woman who looked around, and of a man who did not keep his appointment on time; out of a grain of sand, a mountain. Of course there might have been other causes, but with these I'm not familiar.

This Duchy of Barscheit is worth looking into. Imagine a country with telegraph and telephone and medieval customs, a country with electric lights, railways, surface cars, hotel elevators and ancient laws! Something of the customs of the duchy must be told in the passing, though, for my part, I am vigorously against explanatory passages in stories of action. Barscheit bristled with militarism; the little man always imitates the big one, but lacks the big man's excuses. Militarism entered into and overshadowed the civic laws.

There were three things you might do without offense: you might bathe, eat and sleep, only you must not sleep out loud. The citizen of Barscheit was hemmed in by a set of laws which had their birth in the dark dungeons of the Inquisition. They congealed the blood of a man born and bred in a commercial country. If you broke a law, you were relentlessly punished; there was no mercy. In America we make laws and then hide them in dull-looking volumes which the public have neither the time nor the inclination to read. In this duchy of mine it was different; you ran into a law on every corner, in every park, in every public building: little oblong signs, enameled, which told you that you could not do something or other—"Forbidden!" The beauty of German laws is that when you learn all the things that you can not do, you begin to find out that the things you can do are not worth a hang in the doing.

As soon as a person learned to read he or she began life by reading these laws. If you could not read, so much the worse for you; you had to pay a guide who charged you almost as much as the full cost of the fine.

The opposition political party in the United States is always howling militarism, without the slightest idea of what militarism really is. One side, please, in Barscheit, when an officer comes along, or take the consequences. If you carelessly bumped into him, you were knocked down. If you objected, you were arrested. If you struck back, ten to one you received a beating with the flat of a saber. And never, never mistake the soldiery for the police; that is to say, never ask an officer to direct you to any place. This is regarded in the light of an insult. The cub lieutenants do more to keep a passable sidewalk—for the passage of said cub lieutenants—than all the magistrates put together. How they used to swagger up and down the Konigsstrasse, around the Platz, in and out of the restaurants! I remember doing some side-stepping myself, and I was a diplomat, supposed to be immune from the rank discourtesies of the military. But that was early in my career.

In a year not so remote as not to be readily recalled, the United States packed me off to Barscheit because I had an uncle who was a senator. Some papers were given me, the permission to hang out a shingle reading "American Consul," and the promise of my board and keep. My amusements were to be paid out of my own pocket. Straightway I purchased three horses, found a capable Japanese valet, and selected a cozy house near the barracks, which stood west of the Volksgarten, on a pretty lake. A beautiful road ran around this body of water, and it wasn't long ere the officers began to pass comments on the riding of "that wild American." As I detest what is known as park riding, you may very well believe that I circled the lake at a clip which must have opened the eyes of the easy-going officers. I grew quite chummy with a few of them, and I may speak of occasions when I did not step off the sidewalk as they came along. A man does more toward gaining the affection of foreigners by giving a good dinner now and then than by international law. I gained considerable fame by my little dinners at Muller's rathskeller, under the Continental hotel.

Six months passed, during which I rode, read, drove and dined, the actual labors of the consulate being cared for by a German clerk who knew more about the business than I did.

By this you will observe that diplomacy has degenerated into the gehtle art of exciting jaded palates and of scribbling one's name across passports; I know of no better definition. I forget what the largess of my office was.

Presently there were terrible doings. The old reigning grand duke desired peace of mind; and moving determinedly toward this end, he declared in public that his niece, the young and tender Princess Hildegarde, should wed the Prince of Doppelkinn, whose vineyards gave him a fine income. This was finality; the avuncular guardian had waited long enough for his willful ward to make up her mind as to the selection of a suitable husband; now he determined to take a hand in the matter. And you shall see how well he managed it.

It is scarcely necessary for me to state that her highness had her own ideas of what a husband should be like, gathered, no doubt, from execrable translations from "Ouida" and the gentle Miss Braddon. A girl of 20 usually has a formidable regard for romance, and the princess was fully up to the manner of her kind. If she could not marry romantically, she refused to marry at all.

I can readily appreciate her uncle's perturbation. I do not know how many princelings she thrust into utter darkness. She would never marry a man who wore glasses; this one was too tall, that one too short; and when one happened along who was without visible earmarks or signs of being shop-worn her refusal was based upon just —"Because!"—a weapon as invincible as the fabled spear of Parsifal. She had spurned the addresses of Prince Mischler, laughed at those of the Count of —— — —— (the short dash indicates the presence of a hyphen) and General Muerrisch, of the emperor's body-guard, who was, I'm sure, good enough—in his own opinion—for any woman. Every train brought to the capital some suitor with a consonated, hyphenated name and a pedigree as long as a bore's idea of a

The Princess Hildegrade.

funny story. But the princess did not care for pedigrees that were squint-eyed or bow-legged. One and all of them she cast aside as unworthy her consideration. Then, like the ancient worm, the duke turned. She should marry Doppelkinn, who, having no wife to do the honors in his castle, was wholly agreeable.

The Prince of Doppelkinn reigned over the neighboring principality. If you stood in the middle of it and were a baseball player, you could throw a stone across the frontier in any direction. But the vineyards were among the finest in Europe. The prince was a widower, and among his own people was affectionately styled "der Rot nasig," which, I believe, designates an illuminated proboscis. When he wasn't fishing for rainbow trout he was sleeping in his cellars. He was often missing at the monthly reviews, but nobody ever worried; they knew where to find him. And besides, he might just as well sleep in his cellars as in his carriage, for he never rode a horse if he could get out of doing so. He was really good-natured and easy-going, so long as no one crossed him severely; and you could tell him a joke once and depend upon his understanding it immediately, which is more than I can say for the duke.

Years and years ago the prince had had a son; but at the tender age of three the boy had run away from the castle confines, and no one ever heard of him again. The enemies of the prince whispered among themselves that the boy had run away to escape compulsory military service, but the boy's age precluded this accusation. The prince advertised, after the fashion of those times, sent out detectives and notified his various brothers; but his trouble went for nothing. Not the slightest trace of the boy could be found. So he was mourned for a season, regretted and then forgotten; the prince adopted the grape arbor.

I saw the prince once. I do not blame the Princess Hildegarde for her rebellion. The prince was not only old; he was fat and ugly, with little, elephant-like eyes that were always vein-shot, restless and full of mischief. He might have made a good father, but I have nothing to prove this. Those bottles of sparkling Moselle which he failed to dispose of to the American trade he gave to his brother in Barscheit or drank himself. He was 68 years old.

A nephew, three times removed, was waiting for the day when he should wabble around in the prince's shoes. He was a lieutenant in the duke's body-guard, a quick-tempered, heady chap. Well, he never wabbled around in his uncle's shoes, for he never got the chance.

I hadn't been in Barscheit a week before I heard a great deal about the princess. She was a famous horsewoman. This made me extremely anxious to meet her. Yet for nearly six months I never even got so much as a glimpse of her. Half of the six months she was traveling through Austria, and the other half she kept out of my way, —not intentionally; she knew nothing of my existence; simply, fate moved us about blindly. At court she was invariably indisposed, and at the first court ball she retired before I arrived. I got up at all times, galloped over all roads, but never did I see her. She rode alone, too, part of the time.

The one picture of her which I was lucky enough to see had been taken when she was six, and meant nothing to me in the way of identification. For all I knew I might have passed her on the road. She became to me the Princess in the Invisible Cloak, passing me often and doubtless deriding my efforts to discern her. My curiosity became alarming. I couldn't sleep for the thought of her. Finally we met, but the meeting was a great surprise to us both. This meeting happened during the great hubbub of which I have just written; and at the same time I met another who had great weight in my future affairs.

The princess and I became rather well acquainted. I was not a gentleman, according to her code, but, in the historic words of the drug clerk, I was something just as good. She honored me with a frank, disinterested friendship, which still exists. I have yet among my fading souvenirs of diplomatic service half a dozen notes commanding me to get up at dawn and ride around the lakes, something like 16 miles. She was almost as reckless a rider as myself. She was truly a famous rider, and a woman who sits well on a horse can never be aught but graceful. She was, in fact, youthful and charming, with the most magnificent black eyes I ever beheld in a Teutonic head; witty, besides, and a songstress of no ordinary talent. If I had been in love with her—which I solemnly vow I was not!—I should have called her beautiful and exhausted my store of complimentary adjectives.

The basic cause of all this turmoil, about which I am to spin my narrative, lay in her education. I hold that a German princess should never be educated save as a German. By this I mean to convey that her education should not go beyond German literature, German history, German veneration of laws, German manners and German passivity and docility. The Princess Hildegarde had been educated in England and France, which simplifies everything, or, I should say, to be exact, complicates everything.

She possessed a healthy contempt for that what-d'-ye-call-it that hedges in a king. Having mingled with English-speaking people, she returned to her native land, her brain filled with the importance of feminine liberty of thought and action. Hence, she became the bramble that prodded the grand duke whichever way he turned. His days were filled with horrors, his nights with mares which did not have box-stalls in his stables.

Never could he anticipate her in anything. On that day he placed guards around the palace she wrote verses or read modern fiction; the moment he relaxed his vigilance she was away on some heartrending escapade. Didn't she scandalize the nobility by dressing up a hussar and riding her famous black Mecklenburg cross-country? Hadn't she flirted outrageously with the French attache and deliberately turned her back on the Russian minister, at the very moment, too, when negotiations were going on between Russia and Barscheit relative to a small piece of land in the Balkans? And, most terrible of all to relate, hadn't she ridden a shining bicycle up the Konigsstrasse, in broad daylight, and in bifurcated skirts, besides? I shall never forget the indignation of the press at the time of this last escapade, the stroke of apoplexy which threatened the duke, and the room with the barred window which the princess occupied one whole week.

They burned the offensive bicycle in the courtyard of the palace, ceremoniously, too, and the princess had witnessed this solemn auto da fe from her barred window. It is no strain upon the imagination to conjure up the picture of her fine rage, her threatening hands, her compressed lips, her tearless, flashing eyes, as she saw her beautiful new wheel writhe and twist on the blazing fagots. But what the deuce was a poor duke to do with a niece like this?

For a time I feared that the United States and the Grand Duchy of Barscheit would sever diplomatic relations. The bicycle was, unfortunately, of American make, and the manufacturers wrote to me personally that they considered themselves grossly insulted over the action of the duke. Diplomatic notes were exchanged, and I finally prevailed upon the duke to state that he held the wheel harmless and that his anger had been directed solely against his niece. This letter was duly forwarded to the manufacturers, who, after the manner of their kind, carefully altered the phrasing and used it in their magazine advertisements. They were so far appeased that they offered me my selection from the private stock. Happily the duke never read anything but the Fliegende Blatter and Jugend, and thus war was averted.

Later an automobile agent visited the town—at the secret bidding of her highness—but he was so unceremoniously hustled over the frontier that his teeth must have rattled like a dancer's castanets. It was a great country for expeditiousness, as you will find, if you do me the honor to follow me to the end.

So the grand duke swore that his niece should wed Doppelkinn, and the princess vowed that she would not. The man who had charge of my horses said that one of the palace maids had recounted to him a dialogue which had taken place between the duke and his niece. As I was anxious to be off on the road I was compelled to listen to his gossip.

The Grand Duke—In two months' time you shall wed the Prince of Doppelkinn.

The Princess—What! that old red-nose? Never! I shall marry only where I love.

The Grand Duke—Only where you love! (Sneers.) One would think, to hear you talk, that you were capable of loving something.

The Princess—You have yet to learn. I warn you not to force me. I promise to do something scandalous. I will marry one of the people—a man.

The Grand Duke—Bah! (Swears softly on his way to the stables.)

But the princess had in her mind a plan which, had it gone through safely, would have added many gray hairs to the duke's scanty collection. It was a mighty ingenious plan, too, for a woman to figure out.

In his attitude toward the girl the duke stood alone. Behind his back his ministers wore out their shoes in waiting on the caprices of the girl, while the grand duchess, half-blind and half-deaf, openly worshiped her willful but wholly adorable niece, and abetted her in all her escapades. So far as the populace was concerned, she was the daughter of the favorite son, dead these 18 years, and that was enough for them. Whatever she did was right and proper. But the hard-headed duke had the power to say what should be what, and he willed it that the Princess Hildegarde should marry his old comrade in arms, the Prince of Doppelkinn.

CHAPTER II.

As I have already remarked, I used frequently to take long rides into the country, and sometimes I did not return till the following day. My clerk was always on duty, and the work never appeared to make him round-shouldered.

I had ridden horses for years, but to throw a leg over a good mount was to me one of the greatest pleasures in the world. I delighted in stopping at the old feudal inns, of studying the stolid German peasant, of drinking from steins uncracked these hundred years, of inspecting ancient armor and gathering trifling romances attached thereto. And often I have had the courage to stop at some quaint, crumbling Schloss or castle and ask for a night's lodging for myself and horse. Seldom, if ever, did I meet with a refusal.

I possessed the whimsical habit of picking out strange roads and riding on till night swooped down from the snow-capped mountains. I had a bit of poetry in my system that had never been completely worked out, and I was always imagining that at the very next Schloss or inn I was to hit upon some delectable adventure. I was only 28, and inordinately fond of my Dumas.

I rode in gray whipcord breeches, tan boots, a blue serge coat, white stock, and never a hat or cap till the snow blew. I used to laugh when the peasants asked leave to lend me a cap or to run back and find the one I had presumably lost.

One night the delectable adventure for which I was always seeking came my way, and I was wholly unprepared for it.

I had taken the south highway: that which seeks the valley beyond the lake. The moonfilm lay misty upon everything: on the far-off lake, on the great upheavals of stone and glacier above me, on the long white road that stretched out before me, ribbon-wise. High up the snow on the mountains resembled huge opals set in amethyst. I was easily 25 miles from the city; that is to say, I had been in the saddle some six hours. Nobody but a king's messenger will ride a horse more than five miles an hour. I cast about for a place to spend the night. There was no tavern in sight, and the hovels I had passed during the last hour offered no shelter for my horse. Suddenly, around a bend in the road, I saw the haven I was seeking. It was a rambling, tottering old castle, standing in the center of a cluster of firs; and the tiles of the roofs and the ivy of the towers were shining silver with the heavy fall of dew.

Lady Chloe sniffed her kind, whinnied, and broke into a trot. She knew sooner than I that there was life beyond the turn. We rode up to the gate, and I dismounted and stretched myself. I tried the gate. The lock hung loose, like a paralytic hand. Evidently those inside had nothing to fear from those outside. I grasped an iron bar and pushed in the gate, Chloe following knowingly at my heels. I could feel the crumbling rust on my gloves. Chloe whinnied again, and there came an answering whinny from somewhere in the rear of the castle. Somebody must be inside. I reasoned.

There were lights in the left wing, but this part of the castle was surrounded by an empty moat, damp and

"I Beheld Two Faces in Profile, as It Were."

weedy. This was not to be entered save by a ladder. There was a great central door, however, which had a modern appearance. The approach was a broad graveled walk. I tied Lady Chloe to a tree, knotted the bridle-reins above her neck to prevent her from putting her restless feet into them, and proceeded toward the door.

Of all the nights this was the one on which my usually lively imagination reposed. I was hungry and tired, and I dare say my little mare was. I wasn't looking for an adventure; I didn't want any adventure; I wanted nothing in the world but a meal and a bed. But for the chill of the night air —the breath of the mountain is cold at night—I should have been perfectly willing to sleep in the open. Down drawbridge, up portcullis!

I boldly climbed the steps and groped around for the knocker. It was broken and useless, like the lock on the gate. And never a bell could I find. I swore softly and became impatient. People in Barscheit did not usually live in this slovenly fashion. What sort of place was this?

Suddenly I grew erect, every fiber in my body tense and expectant.

A voice, lifted in song! A great penetrating yet silkily mellow voice; soprano; heavenly, not to say ghostly coming as it did from the heart of this gloomy ruin of stone and iron. The jewel song from Faust, too! How the voice rose, fell, soared again with intoxicating waves of sound! What pentmeating sweetness! I stood there, a solitary listener, as far as I knew, bewildered, my heart beating hard and fast. I forgot my hunger.

Had I stumbled upon one of my dreams at last? Had Romance suddenly relented, as a coquette sometimes relents? For a space I knew not what to do. Then, with a shrug—I have never been accused of lacking courage—I tried once more, by the aid of a match, to locate a bell. There was absolutely nothing; and the beating of my riding crop on the panels of that huge door would have been as noisy as a feather. I grasped the knob and turned it impatiently. Behold! the door opened without sound, and I stepped into the hallway, which was velvet black.

The wonderful voice went on. I paused, with hands outstretched. Supposing I bumped into something! I took a step forward, another and another; I swung my crop in a half circle; all was vacancy. I took another step, this time in the direction of the voice—and started back with a smothered curse. Bang-ang! I had run into a suit of old armor, the shield of which had clattered to the stone floor. As you have observed, I am not a coward, but I had all I could do to keep my legs—which were stirrup-weary, anyhow—from knocking under me!

Silence!

The song died. All over that great rambling structure not even the reassuring chirp of a cricket! I stood perfectly still. What the deuce should I do? Turn back? As I formed this question in my mind a draft of wind slammed the door shut. I was in the dark, it, sure enough; I was positive that I could never find that door again. There was nothing to do but wait, and wait with straining ears. Here were mysterious inhabitants—they might be revolutionists, conspirators, counterfeiters.

Heaven knows how long I waited.

(CONTINUED NEXT WEEK)

Court House News

Condensed For Our Busy Readers

County Court was in session this week:

R. L. Watson renewed his bond to the state for the privilege of operating a ferry. J. C. Hawkins and Mrs. M. E. Watson are his sureties. His bond is for $2000.

The following fiduciary settlements were approved:

P. J. Frenz, administrator of Henrietta Frenz.

R. T. Tyler guardian for W. B. Amberg.

H. J. Locke guardian for Lucile Hampton.

Aruthur Arington guardian for Philip Lee Webster.

The following road overseers were appointed:

J. F. Johnson, 3rd section of the Rock Spring and Fulton road.

John Smith 3rd section of the Dyersbug road.

Van O'Neal Mt. Carnel road.

Geo. Baird 2nd section of the State Line and Dresden road.

W. H. Harpole 8th section of the State Line road.

Winna Henry, Henry road.

Geo. Burrus 2nd section of the Lodgtion and Rock Spring road.

The January term of the Circuit Court convenes at the Court House in Hickman on January 20.

The grand Jury will be empaneled on Monday the first day of the term and the Petit Jury on Tuesday, the second day of the term.

In the docket there are 18 Continued Ordinary Cases and they are set for Wednesday, the 3rd day of the term.

38 Appearance Ordinary set for trial on the 4th day and will be called for answers Monday.

39 Continued Equity and 28 Appearance Equity set for the 3rd day.

125 Commonwealth cases set for the first day of the term.

We have not space this week for the docket but if you have been watching the Courier you know if you are concerned in any of them as we report the cases that have been filed each week.

The following cases were filed last week.

West Tenn. Gro. vs. L. W. and W. G. Perry. Suit on account.

Leonard Mills vs. Henry Vincent. Suit for $2000 for slander.

M. A. Isbell vs. N. C. & St. L. Ry. Suit for damages.

E. F. Davis vs. G. B. Terrett. Suit for damages.

W. H. Hill vs. Hand Made Buggy Co. Suit for mechanic's lien.

B. G. Hale vs. R. H. Speight. Suit to foreclose mortgage.

A. S. Barkett vs. C. A. Shaw. Suit to foreclose mortgage.

Forty cases of smallpox are reported at Jackson, Tenn.